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Private Peaceful

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Published by HarperCollins

Extract

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HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollins *Children's Books* 2003

This paperback edition 2006
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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978 0 00 721918 6
ISBN-10 0 00 721918 0

Set in Bembo

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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FIVE PAST TEN

They've gone now, and I'm alone at last. I have the whole night ahead of me, and I won't waste a single moment of it. I shan't sleep it away. I won't dream it away either. I mustn't, because every moment of it will be far too precious.

I want to try to remember everything, just as it was, just as it happened. I've had nearly eighteen years of yesterdays and tomorrows, and tonight I must remember as many of them as I can. I want tonight to be long, as long as my life, not filled with fleeting dreams that rush me on towards dawn.

Tonight, more than any other night of my life, I want to feel alive.

Charlie is taking me by the hand, leading me because he knows I don't want to go. I've never worn a collar before

and it's choking me. My boots are strange and heavy on my feet. My heart is heavy too, because I dread what I am going to. Charlie has told me often how terrible this school-place is: about Mr Munnings and his raging tempers and the long whipping cane he hangs on the wall above his desk.

Big Joe doesn't have to go to school and I don't think that's fair at all. He's much older than me. He's even older than Charlie and he's never been to school. He stays at home with Mother, and sits up in his tree singing *Oranges and Lemons*, and laughing. Big Joe is always happy, always laughing. I wish I could be happy like him. I wish I could be at home like him. I don't want to go with Charlie. I don't want to go to school.

I look back, over my shoulder, hoping for a reprieve, hoping that Mother will come running after me and take me home. But she doesn't come and she doesn't come, and school and Mr Munnings and his cane are getting closer with every step.

"Piggyback?" says Charlie. He sees my eyes full of tears and knows how it is. Charlie always knows how it is. He's three years older than me, so he's done everything and knows everything. He's strong, too, and very good at piggybacks. So I hop up and cling on tight, crying behind my closed eyes, trying not to whimper out loud. But I cannot hold back my sobbing for long because I know that this morning is not the beginning of anything – not new and exciting as Mother says it is – but rather the end of my beginning. Clinging on round Charlie's neck I know that I

am living the last moments of my carefree time, that I will not be the same person when I come home this afternoon.

I open my eyes and see a dead crow hanging from the fence, his beak open. Was he shot, shot in mid-scream, as he began to sing, his raucous tune scarcely begun? He sways, his feathers still catching the wind even in death, his family and friends cawing in their grief and anger from the high elm trees above us. I am not sorry for him. It could be him that drove away my robin and emptied her nest of her eggs. My eggs. Five of them there had been, live and warm under my fingers. I remember I took them out one by one and laid them in the palm of my hand. I wanted them for my tin, to blow them like Charlie did and lay them in cotton wool with my blackbird's eggs and my pigeon's eggs. I would have taken them. But something made me draw back, made me hesitate. The robin was watching me from Father's rose bush, her black and beady eyes unblinking, begging me.

Father was in that bird's eyes. Under the rose bush, deep down, buried in the damp and wormy earth were all his precious things. Mother had put his pipe in first. Then Charlie laid his hobnail boots side by side, curled into each other, sleeping. Big Joe knelt down and covered the boots in Father's old scarf.

"Your turn, Tommo," Mother said. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. I was holding the gloves he'd worn the morning he died. I remembered picking one of them up. I knew what they did not know, what I could never tell them.

Mother helped me to do it in the end, so that Father's

gloves lay there on top of his scarf, palms uppermost, thumbs touching. I felt those hands willing me not to do it, willing me to think again, not to take the eggs, not to take what was not mine. So I didn't do it. Instead I watched them grow, saw the first scrawny skeletal stirrings, the nest of gaping, begging beaks, the frenzied screeching at feeding time; witnessed too late from my bedroom window the last of the early-morning massacre, the parent robins watching like me, distraught and helpless, while the marauding crows made off skywards cackling, their murderous deed done. I don't like crows. I've never liked crows. That crow hanging there on the fence got what he deserved. That's what I think.

Charlie is finding the hill up into the village hard going. I can see the church tower and below it the roof of the school. My mouth is dry with fear. I cling on tighter.

"First day's the worst, Tommo," Charlie's saying, breathing hard. "It's not so bad. Honest." Whenever Charlie says "honest", I know it's not true. "Anyway I'll look after you."

That I do believe, because he always has. He does look after me too, setting me down, and walking me through all the boisterous banter of the school yard, his hand on my shoulder, comforting me, protecting me.

The school bell rings and we line up in two silent rows, about twenty children in each. I recognise some of them from Sunday school. I look around and realise that Charlie is no longer beside me. He's in the other line, and he's winking at me. I blink back and he laughs. I can't wink with one eye, not yet. Charlie always thinks that's very funny. Then I see Mr

Munnings standing on the school steps cracking his knuckles in the suddenly silent school yard. He has tufty cheeks and a big belly under his waistcoat. He has a gold watch open in his hand. It's his eyes that are frightening and I know they are searching me out.

"Aha!" he cries, pointing right at me. Everyone has turned to look. "A new boy, a new boy to add to my trials and tribulations. Was not one Peaceful enough? What have I done to deserve another one? First a Charlie Peaceful, and now a Thomas Peaceful. Is there no end to my woes? Understand this, Thomas Peaceful, that here I am your lord and master. You do what I say when I say it. You do not cheat, you do not lie, you do not blaspheme. You do not come to school in bare feet. And your hands will be clean. These are my commandments. Do I make myself absolutely clear?"

"Yes sir," I whisper, surprised I can find my voice at all.

We file in past him, hands behind our backs. Charlie smiles across at me as the two lines part: "Tiddlers" into my classroom, "Bigguns" into his. I'm the littlest of the Tiddlers. Most of the Bigguns are even bigger than Charlie, fourteen years old some of them. I watch him until the door closes behind him and he's gone. Until this moment I have never known what it is to feel truly alone.

My bootlaces are undone. I can't tie laces. Charlie can, but he's not here. I hear Mr Munnings' thunderous voice next door calling the roll and I am so glad we have Miss McAllister. She may speak with a strange accent, but at least she smiles, and at least she's not Mr Munnings.

"Thomas," she tells me, "you will be sitting there, next to Molly. And your laces are undone."

Everyone seems to be tittering at me as I take my place. All I want to do is to escape, to run, but I don't dare do it. All I can do is cry. I hang my head so they can't see my tears coming.

"Crying won't do your laces up, you know," Miss McAllister says.

"I can't, Miss," I tell her.

"Can't is not a word we use in my class, Thomas Peaceful," she says. "We shall just have to teach you to tie your bootlaces. That's what we're all here for, Thomas, to learn. That's why we come to school, don't we? You show him, Molly. Molly's the oldest girl in my class, Thomas, and my best pupil. She'll help you."

So while she calls the roll Molly kneels down in front of me and does up my laces. She ties laces very differently from Charlie, delicately, more slowly, in a great loopy double knot. She doesn't look up at me while she's doing it, not once, and I wish she would. She has hair the same colour as Billyboy, Father's old horse – chestnut brown and shining – and I want to reach out and touch it. Then she looks up at me at last and smiles. It's all I need. Suddenly I no longer want to run home. I want to stay here with Molly. I know I have a friend.

In playtime, in the school yard, I want to go over and talk to her, but I can't because she's always surrounded by a gaggle of giggling girls. They keep looking at me over

their shoulders and laughing. I look for Charlie, but Charlie's splitting conkers open with his friends, all of them Bigguns. I go to sit on an old tree stump. I undo my bootlaces and try to do them up again remembering how Molly did it. I try again and again. After only a short while I find I can do it. It's untidy, and it's loose, but I can do it. Best of all, from across the school yard Molly sees I can do it, and smiles at me.

At home we don't wear boots, except for church. Mother does of course, and Father always wore his great hobnail boots, the boots he died in. When the tree came down I was there in the wood with him, just the two of us. Before I ever went to school he'd often take me off to work with him, to keep me out of mischief, he said. I'd ride up behind him on Billyboy and hang on round his waist, my face pressed into his back. Whenever Billyboy broke into a gallop I'd love it. We galloped all the way that morning, up the hill, up through Ford's Cleave Wood. I was still giggling when he lifted me down.

"Off you go, you scallywag, you," he said. "Enjoy yourself."

I hardly needed to be told. There were badger holes and fox holes to peer into, deer prints to follow perhaps, flowers to pick, or butterflies to chase. But that morning I found a mouse, a dead mouse. I buried it under a pile of leaves. I was making a wooden cross for it. Father was chopping away rhythmically nearby, grunting and groaning at every stroke as he always did. It sounded at first as if Father was just groaning a bit louder. That's what I thought it was. But then,

strangely, the sound seemed to be coming not from where he was, but from somewhere high up in the branches.

I looked up to see the great tree above me swaying when all the other trees were standing still. It was creaking while all the other trees were silent. Only slowly did I realise it was coming down, and that when it fell it would fall right on top of me, that I was going to die and there was nothing I could do about it. I stood and stared, mesmerised at the gradual fall of it, my legs frozen under me, quite incapable of movement.

I hear Father shouting: "Tommo! Tommo! Run, Tommo!" But I can't. I see Father running towards me through the trees, his shirt flailing. I feel him catch me up and toss me aside in one movement, like a wheat sheaf. There is a roaring thunder in my ears and then no more.

When I wake I see Father at once, see the soles of his boots with their worn nails. I crawl over to where he is lying, pinned to the ground under the leafy crown of the great tree. He is on his back, his face turned away from me as if he doesn't want me to see. One arm is outstretched towards me, his glove fallen off, his finger pointing at me. There is blood coming from his nose, dropping on the leaves. His eyes are open, but I know at once they are not seeing me. He is not breathing. When I shout at him, when I shake him, he does not wake up. I pick up his glove.

In the church we're sitting side by side in the front row, Mother, Big Joe, Charlie and me. We've never in our lives sat in the front row before. It's where the Colonel and his family

always sit. The coffin rests on trestles, my father inside in his Sunday suit. A swallow swoops over our heads all through the prayers, all through the hymns, flitting from window to window, from the belfry to the altar, looking for some way out. And I know for certain it is Father trying to escape. I know it because he told us more than once that in his next life he'd like to be a bird, so he could fly free wherever he wanted.

Big Joe keeps pointing up at the swallow. Then without any warning he gets up and walks to the back of the church where he opens the door. When he gets back he explains to Mother what he's done in his loud voice, and Grandma Wolf, sitting beside us in her black bonnet, scowls at him, at all of us. I know then what I never understood before, that she is ashamed to be one of us. I didn't really understand why until later, until I was older.

The swallow sits perched on a rafter high above the coffin. It lifts off and swoops up and down the aisle until at last it finds the open door and is gone. And I know that Father is happy now in his next life. Big Joe laughs out loud and Mother takes his hand in hers. Charlie catches my eye. At that moment all four of us are thinking the very same thing.

The Colonel gets up into the pulpit to speak, his hand clutching the lapel of his jacket. He declares that James Peaceful was a good man, one of the best workers he has ever known, the salt of the earth, always cheerful as he went about his work, that the Peaceful family had been employed

in one capacity or another, by his family, for five generations. In all his thirty years as a forester on the estate James Peaceful had never once been late for work and was a credit to his family and his village. All the while as the Colonel drones on I'm thinking of the rude things Father used to say about him – "silly old fart", "mad old duffer" and much worse – and how Mother had always told us that he might well be a "silly old fart" or "mad old duffer", but how it was the Colonel who paid Father's wages and owned the roof over our heads, how we children should show respect when we met him, smile and touch our forelocks, and we should look as if we meant it too, if we knew what was good for us.

Afterwards we all gather round the grave and Father's lowered down, and the vicar won't stop talking. I want Father to hear the birds for the last time before the earth closes in on top of him and he has nothing left but silence. Father loves larks, loves watching them rising, rising so high you can only see their song. I look up hoping for a lark, and there is a blackbird singing from the yew tree. A blackbird will have to do. I hear Mother whispering to Big Joe that Father is not really in his coffin any more, but in heaven up there – she's pointing up into the sky beyond the church tower – and that he's happy, happy as the birds.

The earth thuds and thumps down on the coffin behind us as we drift away, leaving him. We walk home together along the deep lanes, Big Joe plucking at the foxgloves and the honeysuckle, filling Mother's hands with flowers, and none of us has any tears to cry or words to say. Me least of

all. For I have inside me a secret so horrible, a secret I can never tell anyone, not even Charlie. Father needn't have died that morning in Ford's Cleave Wood. He was trying to save me. If only I had tried to save myself, if I had run, he would not now be lying dead in his coffin. As Mother smooths my hair and Big Joe offers her yet another foxglove, all I can think is that I have caused this.

I have killed my own father.